

Detectives of the past

Right off a bustling thoroughfare, in the midst of a quiet residential area of Santa Cruz, is one of the most important archeological finds in the history of Aruba. On March 4, 2001, when digging a foundation for a house in Santa Cruz, a worker found bones that were first believed to belong to a dog. Fortunately, the owner of the land decided to bring them to the attention of the Museo Arqueológico Aruba (AMA). This led to the discovery of a burial site under the foundation which measures about 300 square feet, where 34 graves have been identified. The actual size of the site that likely extends well beyond this area remains unknown.

Raymundo Dijkhoff, supervisor of the dig and head of the Scientific Department of the Archeological Museum of Aruba, sheds light on this amazing discovery. "We have no idea of the extent of the cemetery because there are buildings all around it. It is clear that its existence was unknown when the building took place. This discovery links the different periods of Amerindian habitation; everything we find here is new to us. This period of contact between Europeans and Amerindians

is not well documented in the Americas, making it especially exciting."

"We are now revisiting the site because the owner is planning on building in the short term and we have our team together at this time. We are like detectives of the past, following a multi-disciplinary approach involving experts such as historians, forensic anthropologists, geologists and biologists and gradually unraveling these mysteries. Over the course of time, there are so many factors to take into consideration that can affect our findings. We rely on science, experience, knowledge, physical evidence and the laws of probability to try to arrive at the the most feasible explanations. We work in conjunction with the Malta Treaty dealing with the preservation of our cultural heritage; we must leave all artifacts in situ as long as they are not threatened with destruction, which is the case of this site. But we have to work fast because once the bones oxidize, they disintegrate rapidly."

"We know of cemeteries that date back to the 1840s and 1850s but here we have an

Amerindian cemetery. We find an important mix between European artifacts and cultural influences combined with Amerindian culture. Grave gifts are of European and Amerindian origin and may have been used over a period of 300 years (1500 – 1800). We found more than 2000 glass beads dating back to 1700 and gold rings probably used in trade with Colombia. The first Spanish olive jar discovered on land, dated at 1580-1780 A.D., was also found here. There are shell and stone tools as well. Some of these artifacts are now on display at the Archeology Museum Aruba."

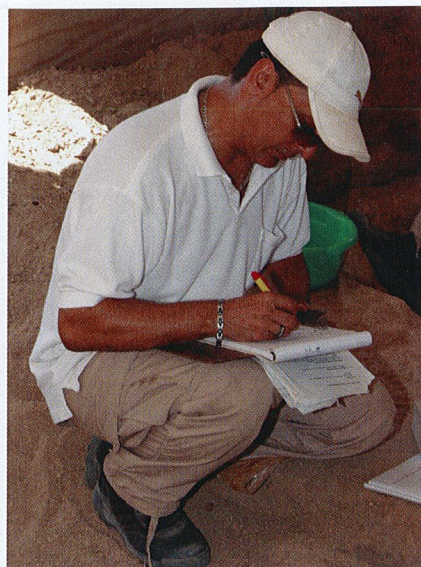
"This is also the first time we have found traces of wooden coffins. All these graves were primary burials which is to be expected from the Historic Period (Catholicism), but we have found at least two graves with evidence of secondary burials, meaning that they were buried elsewhere first. All the individuals were buried in a West-East (head-legs) direction, while differences can be found in the variation of the positions of the hands of the deceased, which must be part of Catholic symbolism."



History & Culture

Raymundo explains that, once the land was surveyed, the site revealed traces of human activity actually covering a period of 1000 years. The bones showed that the graves were of Amerindians. The individuals seem to have some shared genetic characteristics. They also revealed some kind of sudden death, perhaps from an epidemic or malnutrition, a known problem during the Historic Period. The burial site also reveals that the deceased were Catholic and that they had regular contact with Europeans due to materials found. The site shows evidence of different historical periods. The human remains date back to burials from the Amerindian Historic Period (1515-1880). From that period, Aruba has found around 25 archeological Amerindian sites but none have been excavated to this degree.

Different indications show that that this burial site was used from about 100 to perhaps 300 years but it may be that not all the graves were from that one period. Although radio-carbon dating still has to be applied, relative dating, together with historic documents, suggest that these were from the Spanish period (1515 – 1636) and also from



Above: Raymundo Dijkhoff, supervisor of the dig, at work.

Far left: The team of experts from the Archaeological Museum of Aruba at the burial site in Savaneta.

Below: This discovery links the different periods of Amerindian habitation.

the first Dutch period known as the West-India Company period (1636-1791). There was little archaeological information of

this Historical Amerindian period. No Amerindian burial sites of this extent from the Historical Period had ever been discovered before.

There are important gaps in history that must be filled. We know that when the Spaniards colonized, they impacted the culture of the people, bringing their own leaders, religion and language. In the 1500s, there were five or six villages with several hundred Amerindians on the island. The Spaniards came with translators and missionaries. The main cacique (tribal leader) resided in Santa Cruz. This cemetery can be the result of that first contact, meaning the church at Alto Vista that dates back to 1750 is not the oldest church on Aruba.

Historically speaking, we know that the Spanish and the Dutch settled in the southwest coastal area of Aruba. Commandeurs Bay (Savaneta) was where the Spaniards settled, but according to Father Nooyen and other historians, the Spanish placed their cross and established Christianity at the dominating village and also capital of Aruba at that time, Santa Cruz. The name of this area was also given by the Spaniards.

Information about race, sex, age, stature and other data can be studied and linked with historical documentation. Certain assumptions can now be made. For example, there was no record of this cemetery because construction around it would not have taken place. The governors documented all developments on the island; the oldest map dates back to 1770; then others were drafted in 1825 and 1843 and nowhere does it or any community living at Santa Cruz appear.

The government gave out large tracts of land from the mid 19th century onwards for settlement so that this cemetery must predate that time. In this period, the only graves that had ever been discovered were of commanders and Europeans in Hato, Sero Patrishi and Savaneta, while in Alto Vista graves of three Amerindian religious leaders called "fiscals" are found. These cemeteries and graves date back to the mid 18th century and later; it was only from 1820 on that people were obliged to bury the dead in cemeteries.

What happened to all the remains of the Amerindians who lived in Aruba during the Amerindian Historic Period? According to historical documents, there were about 400 in the 18th century and 550 who lived on the island at the beginning of the 19th century. "Now we can begin to answer some of the many questions about this period. It is so important to study this small area not only for us but for our cultural heritage so that future generations can know about the history of our island and our possible ancestors." ■

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